

VZCZCXRO4030
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHAS #0401/01 0681848
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 091848Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0428
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000401

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA A/S WELCH AND NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S WELCH'S VISIT TO ALGIERS

Classified By: DCM Marc Sievers, Reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Assistant Secretary Welch, Embassy Algiers and our Algerian hosts very much look forward to welcoming you to Algiers. President Bouteflika is interested in continuing the dialogue you began in New York last September, and there is indeed much to discuss. Prime Minister Ouyahia and Foreign Minister Bedjaoui are also important interlocutors with their own views to convey. The U.S.-Algerian bilateral relationship continues to develop rapidly across the board, as demonstrated by our recent senior USG visitors, including Secretary Rumsfeld, FBI Director Mueller, U/S Dobriansky, and

SIPDIS

USEUCOM Commander Jones. Your visit comes at a particularly appropriate time to engage with the Algerian leadership on the broad range of NEA issues, as Algeria prepares to pass on the Presidency of the Arab League, remains engaged in a dialogue with Iran, and considers the implications of a new approach to the Western Sahara.

BOUTEFLIKA VERY MUCH IN CHARGE

¶2. (C) President Bouteflika has resumed his usual frenetic pace, and while we still do not know the true state of his health, he is fully engaged and in charge, as demonstrated by the visits in the next two days of President Putin and South Korean President Roh, as well as visits in the past several weeks by Brazilian President Lula, the Portuguese Prime Minister and UK Foreign Secretary Straw. In parallel to his foreign affairs activism, since his December 31 return from medical treatment and recuperation in France, Bouteflika has overseen the implementation of his national reconciliation plan, with the latest steps including the publication of the implementing ordinances and initial releases of prisoners held on terrorism charges. Bouteflika has taken a big risk in implementing such a broad release of former terrorists, with a total of about 2,600 slated to go free, but he appears confident that his initiative will turn the page once and for all on Algeria's national tragedy. While Algerian human rights organizations and NGOs representing survivors of terrorism have complained about Bouteflika's approach, our sense is that the vast majority of Algerians remain hopeful that Bouteflika's gamble will succeed.

¶3. (C) So far, there are not even hints of criticism from the military leadership, which appears optimistic that they will be able quickly to finish off any terrorists still in the mountains once the six month period offered them to surrender has passed. (The military leadership is also no doubt pleased by the fact that the implementing ordinances for national reconciliation specifically preclude any legal action against members of the security forces.) The Algerian military's focus is increasingly shifting to the threats from instability and lack of effective governance in the vast desert of the Trans-Saharan region, and especially northern

Mali. The Algerian military's strategic conception of the problem jibes closely with our own, opening new and promising opportunities for U.S.-Algerian counterterrorism and military to military cooperation.

MOROCCO AND WESTERN SAHARA

14. (C) Despite Ambassador Kherbi's predictable complaints to you about Van Walsum's report to the Security Council, you will likely find an openness in Algiers to new thinking about the Western Sahara. Foreign Minister Bedjaoui told Ambassador earlier this week that he thought the Polisario leadership was "tired" and ready to engage in direct negotiations with Morocco on autonomy. Bedjaoui also suggested such talks might be more productive if held out of the spotlight and away from the region, perhaps in Geneva or New York. We do not know for certain if Bouteflika shares Bedjaoui's analysis, but your visit will provide an excellent opportunity to sound Bouteflika out. If Polisario-Morocco negotiations get started, we expect Algeria would be prepared to play a helpful supporting role, provided it is not cast as a party to the dispute, but rather as a neighbor with important interests at stake.

15. (C) There is considerable frustration here about what they see as Morocco's walking away from a referendum as the key element of the formula for resolving the Western Sahara, and there is annoyance over Morocco's sour response to the Lugar mission as well as to Rabat's tendency to blame all its problems on Algeria. That said, however, there is no real animosity toward Morocco among the Algerian leadership, even if some elements of the Algerian media seem determined to fan the flames. Last year's initially promising efforts to improve Moroccan-Algerian relations collapsed in the summer, but Bouteflika has been careful in his recent public remarks

ALGIERS 00000401 002 OF 003

to avoid offending Morocco, and GOA officials frequently opine that Algeria has no bilateral differences with Morocco aside from the Western Sahara. They do, however, tend to see the Moroccan border as a problem, since they claim smuggled drugs and counterband now flow into Algeria from Morocco and would increase in volume if Algeria officially reopened the border before putting into place appropriate security measures.

IRAQ AND IRAN

16. (C) Although Algeria strongly opposed our decision to invade Iraq, Algeria was generally helpful when it was on the Security Council, supporting the transfer of sovereignty as well as the need for MNF-I. As Arab League President, Algeria backed the Iraqi national dialogue conference in Cairo, and has been supportive of a follow-on meeting in Baghdad. Prime Minister Ouyahia recently told CODEL Hoekstra that the U.S. "should get out of Iraq militarily, but not yet" since he thought a premature U.S. withdrawal would result in civil war. The deaths of two Algerian diplomats who were kidnapped in Baghdad last August remains a sensitive issue, and while they maintain contacts with Iraq through their ambassador resident in Amman, they apparently have decided not to restaff their embassy in Baghdad until security conditions improve. The GOA was an advocate of Sunni empowerment and an Iraqi national unity government before it became U.S. policy, and your interlocutors will be very interested in your assessment of the situation.

17. (C) Algerians are well aware that Iran was a primary outside supporter of terrorism in Algeria, at the peak of the armed Islamist attempt to seize power in the early 1990s, a particularly cruel twist since Algeria had maintained cordial ties with Iran after the Islamic revolution. Algeria broke relations with Iran at the time, and only restored them during Bouteflika's first term. Along with the usual NAM

retorical attachment to redressing Western predominance and Arab sensitivities about Israel's nuclear program, it may be precisely their bitter experience with Iran's trouble-making capacity that is making the Algerians so cautious about dealing with the Iranian nuclear dossier in the Security Council. They have cautioned us that if we move toward imposing sanctions, Iran will respond through proxies to escalate crises in Iraq and Lebanon. According to media reports, Ahmadinejad sent Bouteflika a letter earlier this week, and the two presidents met on the margins of the UNGA in New York. Bouteflika, Ouyahia and Bedjaoui will all be interested in engaging on how to handle Iran, but you are likely to find them convinced that a slow and cautious approach is the best way to proceed.

HAMAS AND SYRIA

18. (C) Algeria has long been a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause and is one of the few Arab League members consistently to deliver on its commitments of assistance to the PA. The Algerians were as surprised as anyone by the extent of Hamas' electoral victory, but they have since made clear to us that they do not agree with our approach of seeking to isolate Hamas until it meets the three conditions set by the Quartet. Instead, they tend to argue that being in power will force Hamas to moderate its position, and that we should be patient. Algeria supports the road map and the Beirut summit peace plan, but they often come across as blind to Israel's security dilemmas, instead suggesting that Israel has no reason to fear being destroyed. While Algerian officials often say that Algeria sees all terrorism anywhere in the world as a threat to Algeria, they make exceptions for Hamas, PIJ, and Hizballah, which they regard as liberation movements, not terrorists. Foreign Minister Bedjaoui even told the Ambassador this week that the U.S. should avoid publicly emphasizing its designation of Hamas as a terrorist organization since this implied that the majority of Palestinian voters were supporters of terrorism. We believe it will be useful for you to explain our sense of where the Israeli-Palestinian nexus is headed and the critical need for pressure on Hamas to accept the Quartet's conditions.

19. (C) Lastly Syria: in his meeting with Senator Lugar last August, Bouteflika claimed Bashar al-Asad was convinced the U.S. was out to get him, and he offered Algerian good offices if they could help reduce tensions between the U.S. and Syria. He also urged the U.S. send Bashar a message to reassure him that we did not seek to overthrow his regime. Algeria nevertheless voted in the Security Council for Syria to cooperate fully with the Mehlis investigation, and much of the Algerian press has been highly critical of Syria's behavior in Lebanon. Bouteflika in particular will be

ALGIERS 00000401 003 OF 003

interested in hearing your views on Syria and Lebanon, including your assessment of the internal political situation in Syria.
ERDMAN